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“Video in Live Performance” by Peter Z. Grossman.

Choreographer Trish Brown's dancers prance about on the walls, not the floor. Artist Joan Jonas performs before an audience seated a quarter-mile away. These and many other manipulations of space and distance have been accomplished by artists without using video. But ever since video has entered their world they've found it a lot easier to play with time and space in their live performances.

To a great extent the entire history of the modern performing arts consists of attempts by artists to reach beyond the limits of convention and tradition. While most of their efforts have centered on breaking down realism in language and movement, they have also sought to transcend the live performance experience itself. Not satisfied with the artifice of traditional stagecraft, the new choreographers, dramatists and musicians have tried to expand the very idea of performance. Their works have been designed not only to blur distinctions between fantasy and reality, but also to demolish every conceivable audience expectation.

Do you assume that gravity keeps dancers firmly earthbound? Well, that the notion Trish Brown tried to challenge by strapping her dancers into harnesses and choreographing a piece for them to execute on the walls of a performance space. Or perhaps you assume that live perfor-

mance is a close and direct interaction between an audience and a performer? Well, Joan Jonas, whose work encompasses dance, theater, and sculpture, was troubled by the same expectation. That's why she performed one of her pieces at such a great physical distance from her viewers. The list could go on to include a host of other unconventional, if not outrageous, performance works.

Liberation through video

Yet, try as they do, artists can go just so far when limited to the live performance. They can play around with words and all forms of behavior, but they can't alter those most basic components of reality, space and time. Live performance space is immutably three-dimensional and performance time is linear, even if the former is measured in hundreds of yards and the latter in weeks or months. Performers and audience are bound by physics if not by their imaginations. Light, sound, and other effects can help create some illusions, but they can't flatten out space, return to the past, or make any other fundamental changes in the structure of reality.

Enter video. When artists finally had a chance to experiment with video, they knew they had discovered a very special tool. With it, they could do almost everything they had wanted to do live. Brown's wall dancers could be duplicated, sans harnesses, with the tilt of a camera; Jonas's distance could be simulated with the help of a chromakey or perhaps just a good wide-angle lens. Artists had seen some of this same potential before in film, but film lacked video's incredible flexibility, immediacy, unpredictability, and presence as a luminous stage object.

And with video, they could expand space and alter time, freely and infinitely. They could present to an audience visions of fantasy and dream. They could show the contrast between an object and the perception of an object—not only what we see, but how we see it. They discovered that video is without question the most versatile device that they'd ever seen for going beyond the confining limits of the live performance experience.

The idea of combining video with live performing arts was not explored until the late 1960s. At the time, video artists had just started making tapes and setting up video environments. Since almost all of their work was shown to a live audience anyway, it was only natural that after a while they would try to mix tapes and video environments with live action (and with live video too). The earliest efforts were inevitably experimental, though the experiments in retrospect seem more suited to the psychology lab than the theater. Works like Vito Acconci's "Claim" and Chris Burden's "Match Piece" essentially involved threatening the audience members' physical well-being, but using video as a mitigating factor, i.e., if you're threatened by a figure on screen, it's less threatening than a direct person-to-person confrontation.

Whatever the merit of these works (and it should be noted that people who attended found a certain fascination in them), they were not really examples of video working with the performing arts. Rather they were video works—demonstrations of the ways video can function and of the ways we see things on video. Not only were their points valid, but they

showed artists some of the potential that video could have as a component of a live performance presentation. Examples of the latter have been given many labels.

"Mixed/inter/multi media" performances are the most common. But whatever they're called, they have been part of the performing-arts since the early 1970s. And video has not been the tool of the avant-garde alone. Artists working in more traditional forms of theater and dance have also found it a valuable aid to their work.

The large glowing eye

Video affects a performance merely by its presence. A monitor on stage is no ordinary prop. It's an element of added suspense. Seeing it there, an audience expects two centers of activity: one live, the other on video. When a monitor is turned on, suspense rises and attention is immediately drawn to the light. Whatever appears will have significance simply because so much attention is focused on it. Even if nothing appears, it will be significant—significant because audience expectations have been cheated. No matter how it's used, it will never be ignored.

Also, video's presence adds a compositional element. It's a box with or without pictures and, if switched on, always a source of light. A few artists have used monitors specifically that way. Dancer/choreographer Marjorie Gamso has found it very compelling to black out a room and leave only lighted monitors. In her "At Turning Points" she had two monitors on in the dark, creating an effect she likened to "large glowing eyes." Joan Jonas, now very involved with video, once turned monitor light into perfor-

mance light. In her "Twilight" she performed in the glare of a lone monitor, curling herself into a hoop—itself a metaphor for the television screen.

Kaddish and Tahmar

Video has been used mostly for narrative, that is, to tell, a story. That's a familiar enough function for it. After all, story—drama and documentary—has been the primary substance of television for more than 30 years. While tv shows convey story information, though, narrative video pieces on stage expand space and time, and add subtle nuances and contrasts to the live material. In Alien Ginsburg's play "Kaddish," for example, video was used to give a documentary quality to the work. Video projections on stage gave it a sense of real time and place. The three-screen set-up (by the Video Free America group) mostly displayed a straightforward documentary, but on a few occasions it also conveyed the feelings and inner experiences associated with real events. In one scene, for example, in which Alien's mother Naomi has a mental breakdown, the video showed the bus station locale as a distorted nightmare of shapes and forms. In other words, video expanded perceptions into a different kind of space: the inner space of the mind.

Since "Kaddish" has a clear narrative component of its own, video only enhanced its presentation. For an artist like Joanne Kelly, though, video's narrative role is more fundamental. In her work "Tahmar" she projected (on a single Advent screen) a prerecorded tape comprised of a series of images—country scenes mostly—and loosely connected sentences both spoken and

projected. Words and images formed a fragmented narrative about a young woman's inner and outer experiences. As the images and words appeared, Kelly performed a series of abstract dance patterns. In themselves, the patterns had no story content, but they were related to the images on the screen. In fact, the two were timed together precisely, a virtual duet of dance with video. Movement seemed to be a reflection on the narrative; narrative gave a literal basis to the movement. Kelly, who lives in San Francisco, regarded "Tahmar" (and another similar performance piece, "Four Part Segway"), as a successor to story ballets like "Swan Lake". However, Tchaikovsky's story is revealed by stage events while the story of "Tahmar" comes to the audience through information on Kelly's Advent screen, to which her dance movements are an accompaniment.

Conquering space

For all its versatility, video does have limiting qualities. Video space, whether on a large screen or a small set, is vastly different from live space, and what's more, it's perceived differently. Live, an audience relates directly to the people and objects in the space. On video they're looking into a world that can't relate back to them. There is always a distance between the people or objects on the screen and the people who are watching.

This distancing quality of video has adversely affected some performances that didn't take it into account. But other artists have taken that characteristic and used it intentionally to place distance between audience and performer or, in some cases, between one performer and

another, "Sonya," a dramatic work by Jack Krueger and Paula Barr, was one example of using video to create distances among people on stage. The piece involved several characters, a few of whom were seen live while the rest were on monitors. Everyone—live and video characters alike—began speaking simultaneously, a steady drone of non-communicative verbalizing. Elements of narrative came through during the few verbal spaces where words could be distinguished. But the characters generally did not, and often could not, relate to each other. While live figures were hardly more willing to interact than video figures, there at least remained some semblance of possibility for communication between them. The people on video, however, were cut off by the medium itself from ever directly relating either to one another or to the people on the stage.

A number of performers (notably Joan Jonas) have also tried distancing themselves from themselves. Using live camera installations, they have performed pieces in relation to their video shadows. Dancers have been particularly intrigued by the idea because they can dance with their own image. And in shadow pieces, distancing is multifaceted. First, the audience is distanced from the performer on the monitor because of the nature of video. At the same time, the audience is distanced from the live individual who is relating not to them, but to the monitor. The performer, however, is in a sense a part of the audience because he or she is watching the monitor and is observing the performance as well as experiencing it—what might be called "self-distancing." The effect is

almost unimaginable with any other medium.

#### Defying gravity

A live camera (or cameras) and monitors create an ongoing mirror that can provide interesting perceptual contrasts, primarily because the mirror isn't true. A straightforward shooting can only beguile a viewer into the belief that the image is an accurate translation of experience. Yet there remains a duality and that becomes apparent after a while. At first, the differences may seem very minor. In addition to psychological factors like distance, there are noticeable distortions of space. The scale is different. Objects seem either too small or too dominant. Then the perspective may seem odd, or even impossible. Or the whole space can be fragmented by video effects. The video art group Live Injection Point, for example, in a recent video/arts program with musician Michael Galasso, superimposed over a straightforward view of the space near the end of the performance in order to dispel the sense that the video picture was identical to the reality.

A more calculated and playful manipulation of audience perceptions was Amy Greenfield's "Mat/Glass." In the Glass section of the piece dancer Ben Dolphyn balanced a water glass on different parts of his body, Greenfield, who conceived and choreographed the work, had two camera operators show the balancing act from varying perspectives and angles. The audience was able to watch both camera angles and Dolphyn's live actions by just shifting their eyes. On screen, Dolphyn seemed to be defying gravity. Topsy-turvy lime

In addition to manipulating space, video can also create distortions of time. Impossible to do on stage live, it is simple with camera, deck, and monitor. Performers have employed various techniques such as tape delays, tape loops, prerecorded materials that come in and out of synch with the live performance, and so on. With them, the past is as available as the present, and can be repeated indefinitely.

A particularly intricate attempt at time distortion was the Aldo Tambellini/Sarah Dickinson work "Pierot in Time." Dickinson, a mime, performed a movement segment that was simultaneously shown on monitors and taped. Then she moved on to another segment. As she did it live, two monitors showed a playback of the first segment. Meanwhile, two other monitors displayed the live movement which was also taped. (Since the monitors formed a background for the performance, the video caught brief flickers of the images on the monitors. In other words, the taped segments showed glimpses of other segments as well as some feedback images—all of them like echoes in time.) The performance continued that way. Segments were taped and replayed until finally there were three different segments on three sets of monitors going on at once while Dickinson performed a related fourth segment of movement. The piece seemed to be a visual and temporal fugue. One past was layered over the next and together they became the present.

"Pierot in Time" was an example of an abstract and highly conceptualized use of video. The medium was primary, an indispensable component of the piece. But video

has on occasion functioned merely in a subordinate role to enhance and clarify abstract performance concepts. Marjorie Camso's "Magnetic Ferry" was a work that used a few brief video inserts—simple images that noted an idea (multiplying energies) that was explored in greater detail by her and her dancers. Unquestionably, the video was only an aid to the piece, and the dancers could have performed it without any video at all. But the monitor images did serve a purpose: focusing special attention on, and enhancing the understanding of an abstract idea that was an important feature of the work.

These are just a few of the roles that video has filled in live arts performances. Of course, it's possible to mix several of them and, no doubt, add others not mentioned here. It's still a new form and it has endless room to grow. And performers seem to be increasingly enthusiastic about video because of its great ability to help them reach beyond the conventional and to implement new ideas. Then again, sometimes its appeal is a lot simpler. Said Marjorie Gamso: "One of the main reasons I use video is because it's fun."

The author, a freelance writer, is coeditor of "The Handbook of Television Dance," an anthology that will be published by Marcel Dekker Inc. by the end of this year.